

ABOUT THE COVER: WHITE-THROATED SPARROW

The White-throated Sparrow (*Zonotrichia albicollis*) is a bird for all seasons, a welcome visitor at the winter bird feeder, and a distinctive songster of the northern forests in summer. On migrations it responds well to "spishing," often hopping up to an exposed perch. It is a relatively large, chunky, long-tailed sparrow, with a distinctive yellow "supraloral" spot punctuating the superciliary strip of white or tan between the eye and bill. The sharply defined white throat gives the species its name. A buffy back streaked with black is highlighted by russet wings and scapulars. The sexes are similar, but first-winter birds are duller with streaked breasts, and juveniles are heavily streaked.

White-throated sparrows are monotypic, with no subspecies described. They have been documented hybridizing with Golden-crowned Sparrows and juncos, although this is apparently rare. The species is polymorphic, with some birds having white superciliary stripes and some tan. Tan-striped birds generally have some breast streaking, while white-striped birds have uniform gray breasts. This genetically controlled dimorphism makes the White-throat one of the world's most distinctive and interesting birds, because the dimorphism is not only in plumage color but also in behavior. White-striped males tend to sing more, are more aggressive than their tan-striped counterparts, and provide less care for their young. White-striped females sing and help in territorial defense while tan-striped females do not, but the latter provide more care for their young. In general white-striped birds are brighter in plumage, more aggressive, and "masculinized." The dimorphism persists in White-throated Sparrows because of "negative assortative mating," meaning that nearly all breeding pairs consist of either white-striped males with tan-striped females, or tan-striped males with white-striped females. The mating system of the White-throated Sparrow is complex, and although several explanatory hypotheses have been advanced, the causal factors remain obscure.

The breeding range of White-throated Sparrows extends from the Yukon Territory across much of Canada, south across the Great Lakes to the East Coast, and southward in the Appalachians to West Virginia. In Massachusetts they are common nesters from Worcester County west, particularly at higher elevations. They winter from the southeastern Maritime Provinces and southern Great Lakes throughout most of the U.S. east of the Rocky Mountains.

In winter, White-throated Sparrows form flocks and establish stable dominance hierarchies, and often join mixed-species flocks. They are birds of brushpiles, thickets, and woodland edge. In Massachusetts they are considered uncommon winter residents, more numerous near the coast, where over a hundred are sometimes reported on a single Christmas Count. Migrants arrive in Massachusetts in April and early May, when they may be abundant, with

October the major time of fall migration. They are nocturnal migrants, uttering *seep* contact calls within their loose flocks.

White-throated Sparrows are seasonally monogamous, usually producing a single brood. Their preferred nesting habitat is semi-open mixed woodlands of fir, aspen, white cedar, and tamarack swamps and bogs. They are highly territorial, often returning to the same territories year after year. They frequently sing their beautiful song from high perches. This song has been transliterated as *Old Sam Peabody, Peabody, Peabody*, or *Oh, sweet Canada, Canada, Canada* — one or two whistled notes followed by three or four wavering notes on a higher pitch. They also have various *chink* or *tip* alarm calls. Displays include wing-fluttering and trills.

White-throated Sparrows nest from May to early June, mostly on the ground, with the nest cup of grass, twigs, and pine needles, lined with fine grass or deer hair, well concealed beneath shrubs. The female builds the nest, and alone incubates the 4-5 bluish-green, ruddy-spotted eggs. The eggs hatch in twelve days or so, and the chicks commonly fledge eight or nine days later. The adults will perform distraction displays, running with wings drooping or wings up if the nest is approached. Brooding is mostly by the female, but both parents feed the young.

White-throated Sparrows are mostly ground foragers, often rhythmically scratching with both feet to uncover food and sending leaf-litter flying. They may flip leaves, hawk or pounce on insects from a perch, and glean twigs and foliage. Their diet consists of insects, seeds, and berries, with pronounced seasonal dietary shifts.

This species was hunted for food in the nineteenth century, but has remained very common or abundant from colonial times to the present. They are not commonly parasitized by cowbirds, but as ground nesters they are subject to predation by mammals. They have been affected by habitat alteration in the southern part of their range, and as nocturnal migrants they are subject to collision with towers — more than 400 have been reported killed at the Prudential tower in Boston in a single night. Yet their populations thrive, their sweet song continues to haunt northern bogs, and they continue to add a cheery presence to our back yards during winter.

— William E. Davis, Jr.